



## CUSTOMER DISCOVERY: Module 2, Episode 2 – Storytelling

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**TITLE:**

Building Blocks of a Great Story

**DESCRIPTION:**

Building a story is easy when you have the frameworks. In this episode, we describe what those frameworks are and why they are important.

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**[LEARN@LIFT Episode Intro]**

Welcome back everyone. On the last episode, we discussed why story and storytelling are important. As a quick reminder, story is our best form of communication because it taps into our brain's natural need to resolve change.

This is directly important to you because crafting great stories around what your startup does will help you get funded, find customers, sell your solution, and find talent so much more easily than if you have a mediocre story.

So, today, we're going to dive into what elements create great stories.

I'm sure most of you are familiar with Pixar - one of the greatest story-producing businesses. They have devised a great framework for how to build an impactful story that can be distilled into 6 criteria:

We'll unpack each of them in a moment, but, the 6 criteria are:

1. Great stories are universal
2. Great stories have clear structure and purpose
3. Great stories have a character to root for (an underdog)

4. Great stories appeal to our deepest emotions
5. Great stories are surprising and unexpected
6. Great stories are simple and focused

Let's start with number 1: Great stories are universal.

Across language, across borders, across cultural differences, humans all live through certain common experiences - things like, birth, death, growth, conflict, emotionality, aspiration. Regardless of where you're from, you've most likely experienced one or more of these, and you can relate to others who have gone through them, too. A great story taps into these universal experiences, creating a sense of familiarity that any audience can relate to.

Remember, your brain wants to absorb others' stories as its own, adding to its catalog of responses to change. It wants to know, "if I were in that situation, what would I do? How would I react? How am I supposed to react in order to survive?" so that when it encounters that situation itself, it already knows the answer.

Number 2: Great stories have clear structure and purpose.

For a story to make sense, it has to have structure. All stories follow a very similar cadence, which mimics the brain's interpretation of change: it's going about its normal business, focusing on a tiny fraction of space in front of it. Then, something occurs to bring the brain out of its narrow focus, into exploration mode in response to a change moment. Once it has identified the change, it calculates how to respond, going into problem-solving mode. Once a solution is conjured, it can spring into action. The action leads to a resolution that, in turn, yields to growth and increased survivability.

A story follows this exact rhythm. Kenn Adams, a professional playwright and improviser, came up with a formula called the Story Spine that provides this structure.

It goes like this: Once upon a time there was [blank]. Every day, [blank]. One day [blank]. Because of that, [blank]. Until finally [blank]. {Repeat twice.}

Using this formula, you can see that a story begins with life as normal, then introduces the change moment that catalyzes a search for a solution that ultimately leads to an action taken that resolves the change.

This is a great story's structure. Use it.

A great story also has purpose. Ask yourself: Why is this story important to tell? Who is it important for? What will they learn from the story? And what is the change that you want them to feel by the end?

Purposefully designing what the story is supposed to accomplish - what it is supposed to teach - is fundamental to good storytelling.

The third element of great storytelling is that the audience has someone to root for, usually an underdog.

A great story has a protagonist, the person whose experience we are relating to. They are the person experiencing the change event, feeling the universal emotions, and innovatively devising solutions to spring into action and resolve the change.

A great story draws us into this protagonist's life, into their experiences, conundrums, motivators, and actions. We feel their experience as our experience and become invested in learning how their journeys unfold. We want to see them succeed.

One of our favorite kinds of protagonists is the underdog. And it's rooted in our sense of moral outrage.

As social creatures, one of our favorite ways to use story is to show what happens when people behave and misbehave according to our social norms.

As social creatures, we are constantly in a tug-of-war between our self-interest and our need to belong, both essential survival tactics. We need others to survive - and therefore must cooperate. But we are also competitive and self-interested. We are constantly at odds.

For the societal structure to exist, however, cooperation must endure more than self-interest.

Many stories therefore serve a deeper purpose of reinforcing what good behavior looks like and what bad behavior looks like: cooperation versus self-interest. The goodie versus the baddie.

This is where the story of the underdog comes in. We love a story where a cooperative protagonist has to fight against an oppressive, self-interested villain, and wins. We are morally outraged at the villain's behavior, and root for the protagonist's ability to change the circumstance, system, or relationship of unfairness and create a more just, peaceful existence.

A great story weaves in some moral outrage and a protagonist who is hell-bent on resolving it.

The fourth element of a great story is appealing to humans' deeper emotions.

Humans are feeling creatures. And we feel a lot. It is generally accepted that there are 6 major emotions: anger, disgust, fear, joy, sadness, and surprise. And we constantly process our world through these emotions.

Think about any situation you find yourself in during your day, and think about what feelings you had. For example, when you were standing at the grocery checkout, were you bored (disgust)? Were you frustrated that the line wasn't moving fast enough (anger)? Were you peacefully allowing the moment to just be (joy)? Each situation you find yourself in has an associated feeling - sometimes many more than one. You might not always be aware of your feelings, but they are constantly operating.

Being able to explain your protagonist's experiences through the lens of emotions makes them, not only more relatable, but also frames the foundation upon which any future action is taken. A frustrated customer at a checkout counter that later yells at the checkout clerk is a sequence that makes sense. The action relates to the feeling. If the peaceful customer did that, the story wouldn't make as much sense.

Most importantly, though, if the audience didn't know what feelings were driving you to feel angry in the first place, they wouldn't empathize with you and wouldn't want to root for your cause. It is in understanding the feelings of others that we accept the actions they take.

A great story is therefore one that makes your audience feel, one where they are connecting to the protagonist's experience as if they were there, desperate to know how everything turns out in the end.

The fifth element of great stories is that they are surprising and unexpected.

What makes a story compelling is when it challenges our perceptions of reality, when it takes us out of our normal lives and helps us understand and reflect on big topics that we might not otherwise think about.

A great story captivates us with new twists, new plots, new ways of thinking.

Since our brains are always looking for information about how to respond to new situations, we love stories that make us think about something new and how we might respond to similar events if we were the protagonist.

Stories that are surprising or unexpected prompt our brain to fire up and say, "what's going to happen next?" and keep us highly engaged.

The final element of great stories is that they are simple and focused.

Go back to your story's purpose and ask yourself: is everything that I'm sharing in my story related to this story's purpose? If it's not, get rid of it.

Your audience will abandon your story if they can't find their way through too much complication. Remember, your brain wants resolution much more than it wants to have to sort through layers of information to actually understand what's happening. The challenge is to create enough intrigue without confusing your audience.

Telling great stories takes work, but it is achievable. Following these 6 frameworks will give you a great foundation with which to start.

Over the course of the last two episodes, we've discussed why storytelling is so powerful and what elements comprise a great story.

In our next episode, we're going to stitch this together with how storytelling is relevant for your startup. Specifically, how you can use what we've learned to build a pitch about your startup that motivates others to act.

**[Insert episode closing]**